A Hungry Beast Is Gaslighting You

An Essay on Social Media, Literary Culture, and the Wrong Monster

KC Clarke
Cuyahoga Valley, Ohio
April 2026

Americans are consuming more content than at any point in human history. According to the National Endowment for the Arts, they are reading fewer books than at any point in thirty years. Nobody is talking about what happened in between.

There is a monster everyone is talking about. Then there is the monster that built the room they are talking in.

The hearings. The open letters. The picket lines. The think pieces arriving daily about artificial intelligence and the death of culture. The concern is real. The monster is wrong. While everyone watches the door, Vecna sits offstage in the Upside Down, patient, already victorious, chortling. The Mind Flayer is already in the building. It has been in the building for twenty years. It is in your pocket right now.

The universities are in the chorus too. Humanities departments across the country have declared AI an existential threat to education, to critical thinking, to the integrity of student writing. The concern is not wrong. But it arrives from institutions that spent thirty years cutting literature programs, shrinking English departments, and steering students toward majors with measurable economic outcomes. The beast ate the humanities from inside the academy before AI knocked on the door. The professors defending the canon are now responding to AI after watching enrollment in their own programs collapse for a generation without calling it a crisis.

And the disciplines best equipped to analyze what AI actually is, to ask who built it, who controls it, what it was trained on, what it displaces, and what it might restore, have largely declined to do that work. The tools of literary and cultural criticism are precisely the tools this moment requires. Meanwhile AI itself sits ready to assist that analysis. It can close-read a platform's terms of service. It can trace the economics of algorithmic curation. It can map the collapse of local news across a decade. It can pressure test a poem or a work of fiction, not to replace the critic, but to give the critic a collaborator of unusual recall, one that has read more than any single mind could hold. The humanities are not using the tool to examine the tool, or to do what the tool cannot do alone. They are avoiding the instrument that might make them more powerful critics at exactly the moment when powerful criticism is most needed.

Social media was supposed to democratize information. Give voice to the voiceless. Connect the world. What it mostly produced was surveillance capitalism, algorithmic radicalization, and the collapse of the infrastructure that literary culture depends on. It built a closed system. It controlled the feed, the algorithm, the attention, the advertising revenue, the narrative. It ate the bookstore. It ate the local critic. It ate the newspaper. Then it became the only game in town.

AI did not cause those numbers. Social media did.

The data is specific enough to date. In 2012, 54.6% of American adults read at least one book in the past year. By 2017 that number had fallen to 52.7%. By 2022 it had dropped to 48.5%. These are federal numbers, from the NEA's Survey of Public Participation in the Arts, conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau. Creative narrative fell harder. Poetry and fiction are kin. Fiction descends from poetry: the compression, the image that carries more than it literally says, the patience a line demands from a reader. Both are forms of human imagination that make no claim to be true. That honesty is the contract between writer and reader. In 2022, only 37.6% of adults reported reading a novel or short story, the lowest figure since the survey began more than three decades ago. When you damage the root, you damage everything that grows from it. AI did not cause those numbers. Social media did.

To understand how, you have to look at what disappeared first.

The bookstore workforce peaked in 2008. By 2016, 45% fewer people were working in bookstores than eight years earlier. Borders filed for bankruptcy in February 2011 and closed its remaining 399 stores by September of that year. The American

Booksellers Association had roughly 7,000 member stores when Amazon was founded in 1994. That number collapsed in the years that followed.

The local newspaper went the same way. Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism has tracked the local news landscape for twenty years. Almost 40% of all local U.S. newspapers have vanished since 2005. More than 3,500 papers gone. Two closures per week, still happening. Fifty million Americans now live in places with limited or no access to reliable local news. Local arts and culture coverage is all but nonexistent in many of those places.

The local book critic was a casualty of the same collapse. Not a dramatic casualty. A quiet one. The position was simply eliminated, column by column, paper by paper, across a decade.

What the bookstore and the local critic provided was not merely access to books. It was curation. Someone with knowledge and accountability saying: this is worth your attention. That function is not a luxury. It is the mechanism by which literary culture reproduces itself. When it disappears, something fills the space.

What filled it was social media. And social media brought its own narrative form.

Creative narrative went feral.

Conspiracy theory does everything a novel does. It has a hero and a villain. It has a hidden pattern revealed to those paying attention. It has stakes that feel absolute. It is creative narrative wearing the costume of truth. It broke the contract. The platforms were built to spread it because, dressed as fact, it provoked more engagement than anything that admitted it was made up. The appetite for poetry and fiction did not shrink. Creative narrative went feral.

Between 2012 and 2017, the rate of poetry reading among adults grew by 76 percent. Instagram had discovered the couplet. A poet could find a million readers overnight. It looked like a renaissance. By 2022, six million readers had gone somewhere else, assuming they were ever reading poetry to begin with.

This happened to musicians on Spotify. Journalists on Facebook. Writers everywhere. The beast offers reach. Artists build on it. The beast changes the terms. This is not a bug. It is the business model.

Consider the physical infrastructure of the beast. Data centers already powered everything digital, the feeds, the algorithms, the advertising platforms, the surveillance architecture, before AI entered the room. This was not the first addition. Bitcoin and the crypto boom that followed demanded their own expansion, their own enormous energy draw, arriving with promises of decentralized revolution and delivering something else entirely. AI did not replace that infrastructure. It was added to it, as crypto was added before it. The boom in data center construction now

underway is being driven by AI demand, layered on top of a system that was already consuming at scale. The environmental conversation arrived with AI. The infrastructure it is expanding was built by social media. The damage to literary culture arrived a decade earlier, quietly, and nobody called it a crisis.

The data center debate is real. Bitcoin expanded that infrastructure. AI is expanding it further. But the beast had already done its work. The collapse in reading did not wait for cryptocurrency or artificial intelligence. It happened in the years when the only thing filling those data centers was the feed.

Now AI has entered that devastated landscape. And the beast is fighting back.

This is where the story gets complicated. AI may be reopening functions of access, recommendation, and dialogue that social media degraded or enclosed. A reader in a town with no bookstore and no local critic can now have a genuine literary conversation at midnight. Curation. Access. Recommendation. Some of the functions the beast ate are being rebuilt by the thing the beast is calling a monster. That is not a coincidence. Vecna does not want the lights turned on.

Social media devoured the local critic. Search inherited the wreckage. Now AI is being folded into search itself, where conversation is restored for the user while the link to the open web grows weaker. The user gets an answer. The writer gets nothing. The link that might have led a reader to a bookstore, a press, a local paper, a poet weakens or disappears entirely. Every iteration concentrates more value at the platform level and leaves less for the people who made the thing being summarized, answered, or replaced. Nobody knows where this goes. But the direction is legible.

The technology the humanities fear most is the technology most formed by the humanities.

There is an irony worth sitting with. AI did not arrive quite like social media arrived. It arrived more like the early web: rowdy, imperfect, ungated, genuinely curious. The early web let a poet find a reader anywhere. Before the platforms enclosed it, before search monetized it, before the feed replaced the link, it offered extraordinary conditions for literary discovery. AI carries something of that earlier openness, even as it is rapidly being folded into more closed systems. It was trained on vast swaths of the written record, which means it was trained substantially on literature, philosophy, history, poetry, and criticism. The humanities are not peripheral to what AI is. They are structural to it. Whether that shapes what AI becomes, whether the thing trained on Keats and Baldwin and Dickinson and Du Bois carries any of that forward into the culture, remains genuinely unknown. But it is worth noting that the technology the humanities fear most is the technology most formed by the humanities. That is not a small irony.

Much remains unknown about AI. Bitcoin was supposed to revolutionize banking. Social media was supposed to democratize the web. Both delivered something other

than their promise. AI may do the same. Its evils, if they come, are still largely untested and unknown. We should be clear-eyed about that. But here is what is not unknown. The crisis in reading is documented. It has dates. It has a perpetrator.

This essay exists on the Internet Archive, a platform built explicitly to preserve what the internet destroys. A generation ago, it might have run in a local newspaper, reviewed by a local critic, discovered in a bookstore. Those institutions are largely gone. The platform with the reach, the one where you likely encountered a link to this page, is the beast this essay is about.

The same entity that dismantled the infrastructure now offers itself as the replacement. That is not a solution. That is a protection racket. The problem is not that such work stopped being made. The problem is that the systems that once surfaced it were eaten alive.

The beast is gaslighting you about its replacement. The prosecution is being led by the perpetrator.

Note on the Work: I wrote this essay from within the conditions it describes. It appears alongside *Between Here and the Sound of a Groaning Interstate and The Groaning Book: A Poetics*, a dual-volume work decades in the making, published by 1802 Press in March 2026. When that work finally arrived, it entered a literary landscape with fewer bookstores, fewer local critics, less regional coverage, and weaker forms of discovery than the one in which I began writing. This essay names that rupture. The two books answer it in form: a book of poems and a companion volume that uses criticism, structure, and AI-assisted recall not to generate the work, but to witness and examine it.

This essay is archived at the Internet Archive and may be freely shared.
© KC Clarke, 2026

About the Author: KC Clarke is the author of *Between Here and the Sound of a Groaning Interstate* and *The Groaning Book: A Poetics*, and of *Wolves and Flax: The Prior Family in the Cuyahoga Valley Wilderness*. His professional life has included leadership in literary centers, museums, libraries, and nonprofit institutions, as well as editorial and creative direction for numerous books. He writes from within the civic and cultural infrastructure this essay describes.